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ABSTRACT

Public school educators often fail to appreciate the various reasons home schooling is an increasingly attractive option for families of nearly every class, race, religion, and political perspective. Parents preferring to home school their children generally reveal one of two motivations for their decision. 'Idealogues' aim to promote specific beliefs, values, and skills, while 'Pedagogues' believe that home schooling offers a superior education, even if the content of public schools is seen as less problematic. The most damaging conflict between educators and parents is an 'Us versus Them' perception rooted in limited negative experiences and poor mutual understanding. Parents should develop a better understanding and appreciation of the value of public schools and educators should focus on assisting students in all settings, including students schooled at home. Parents and educators should see their roles as complementary. Building a productive relationship is possible through exchanging ideas, offering dual enrollment, and providing a home-school liaison. Productive partnerships can improve the academic success of both home and public school students. (Contains 11 references.) (TEJ)

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Home School and Public School: Rethinking the Relationship

Michael H. Romanowski

Home schooling, once considered an anomaly in American education, has become an increasingly popular alternative to both public and private schools in today's culture. There are an estimated 1,200,000 to 1,700,000 students in grades K-12 currently being home-schooled in the United States (Lines 1999; Ray 1999). This spectacular growth not only testifies to the demand by parents for less institutionalized options for their children's education, but has also established home schooling as a significant and legitimate force in the American educational landscape.

One of the more fascinating aspects of the home-school movement is its appeal to a demographic diversity that includes virtually all races, religions, socioeconomic groups, and political viewpoints. There are conservatives who consider public education too liberal, liberals who consider it too conservative, and those who are driven by religious convictions (Knowles *et al.* 1992).

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Despite its growth, however, home schooling is not without problems and difficulties. In particular, the relationship with public schools is often tense. This is due, in part, to a lack of understanding by public school educators as to why parents choose to home-school their children. This results in the "us versus them" mentality that often governs relationships between professional educators and home school parents. Both need to rethink their roles and build partnerships that will benefit children wherever they are taught.

Why Home Schooling?

Although parents choose to home-school their children for many reasons, Van Galen (1988) places these parents into two distinct categories: ideologues and pedagogues. The ideologues have specific beliefs, values, and skills that they want their children to learn and embrace. Because they are convinced that these things are not being adequately taught in public school, they opt for home schooling. The ideologues' motivation is essentially religion-based and they have expressed the belief that public schools are "grounded in a secular humanist philosophy that does not include strong Christian values" (Marchant and MacDonald 1994). They have a strong concern for their children's moral, ethical, and spiritual development, and they feel that public schools fail to take religion seriously. For these parents, their religious beliefs and the education of their children are inextricably intertwined.

Pedagogues prefer to teach their children at home primarily because they feel it will benefit their children's education. They are less concerned with the content of public education than their conviction that whatever public schools teach, they don't teach well. Often, these parents have turned to home schooling after having experienced or observed children suffering emotionally and/or academically in public schools. They also feel that "schools are often unwilling or unable to serve children with unique learning styles or scholarly needs" (Van Galen 1988, 1987). They challenge the power of public schools to sort, select, and label their children based on what they see as a limited measure of their ability. This leads them to

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Leadership. The principal communicates effectively with all segments of the school and the community, and welcomes suggestions from those groups.

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believe "that breaking from the traditional formal model of teaching will lead to improved understanding and learning in their children" (Marchant and MacDonald 1994).

"Us Versus Them"

The most common—and most damaging—conflict between public-school educators and parents who opt to home-school their children is the "us versus them" attitude grounded in their limited and often negative experiences with each other.

For example, there is a tendency to stereotype home-school parents as "loners who do not care about the opinions of others" (Lines 1996). They are perceived as people who are withdrawn from society and want to shelter their children from the "evil" of public schools. They are often viewed as arrogant because they express their view that public schools aren't good enough for their children.

On the other hand, many public-school teachers and principals view home schooling as a serious threat and take offense at what they regard as personal attacks on their profession and their abilities. They look on home educators as professionally and academically inferior and accuse home schooling of "lack of social development, lack of classroom-provided stimulation of ideas, and lack of academic and social competition" (Duffey 1998).

Although there may be some truth in these stereotyped portrayals, the "us versus them" mentality creates an atmosphere of distrust that can produce several negative results. First, these opposing perspectives inhibit any formal cooperation between home and public schools. Second, the tension and uneasiness between home schoolers and public educators discourages any formal or informal dialogues, discussions, or sharing of ideas between them. In the long run, students lose because shared information might improve learning and academic success in both educational settings. For this "us versus them" thinking to change, both public-school educators and home-schooling parents must review and rethink their views of education and their roles in the education process.

With home schooling's growth as an alternative to public schools, the educational landscape in America is changing. With the changes come new issues and uncertainties that are slowly forcing both sides to reconsider their perceptions of education in today's society. How can they overcome the "us versus them" barrier?

How Home Schoolers Can Change

First, parents who choose home schooling must begin to move away from negative views of public schools and start to perceive the important and essential role of public education in the United States. They must develop an understanding of the responsibilities that public schools bear and they must view themselves not as self-contained entities, but as part of a larger educational system deserving of their support. This support can take a variety of forms, ranging from making monetary donations to volunteering. The key is for home-school parents to become involved with their public schools because "home educators who feel connected to their schools will support those schools more fully—and support of the community is critical to public schools" (Terpstra 1994). Furthermore, the understanding and support is needed because all citizens benefit from public education.

How Public-School Educators Can Change

Public-school principals and teachers must also begin to transform their negative perspectives of home schooling and the parents who make this choice. They need to recognize the reality that parents have the primary responsibility for educating their children, and that the parents, the school, and the community must work together to maximize every child's potential. Rather than questioning motives and feeling threatened when families choose to home-school, public-school educators should aid those families wherever possible. The public school's responsibility is not only to students who enter the schoolhouse doors, but to all students in the community.

By working with rather than against home schoolers, public schools can derive some valuable benefits. For example, public schools could look to home schools for new and innovative ways to "improve such areas as parent involvement, individualized instruction, and the use of computer technology to enhance learning" (Duffey 1998). Other areas where home schools might provide guidance for public schools include one-on-one tutoring, distance learning, child-initiated learning, the effects of different learning environments on student achievement, and the impact of varied curricula on student learning.

Public-school educators cannot ignore the evidence that most home schoolers do very well on achievement tests, often outperforming their public school peers. Since proficiency testing often drives public education, public schools should be particularly interested in why home-schooled children perform well on these tests, and how this knowledge could be used by public-school teachers to help students improve their scores. But in order for home schooling to make these positive contributions to public education, there must be a climate of mutual understanding and respect.

Building a Working Relationship

Instead of viewing themselves as competitors, the public school and home school should be seen as complementing each other. Both have their place and purpose in the educational process of a free society. More important, mutual recognition and respect can be the basis for developing a productive relationship.

While there is now a more favorable legal climate for home schooling than in earlier years, allowing home-school families to remain completely removed from public education, there are many such families who want to build positive working relationships

with their public schools. Findings from a recent study in Virginia (Golding 1995) revealed that most home-schooling parents want such relationships with local public schools, and that they would welcome assistance in the form of classes, inservices, use of school facilities and materials, and curriculum information (Duffey 1998). Here are some ways to begin building a home school-public school relationship.

Exchange ideas. This is especially important to home schoolers, many of whom depend upon a home-school network for ideas and support. Both public-school teachers and home-school parents could benefit from a formal system enabling them to engage in pedagogical dialogue. This dialogue could take a variety of forms, ranging from simply e-mailing specific questions and answers on particular issues to sharing inservice training, curriculum information, and school facilities with home-school parents. I know of one public school teacher who even offered to conduct a special parents' night for home-school parents to discuss issues relevant to their children's education.

Offer dual enrollment. Under this arrangement, home-schooled students would have an opportunity "to enroll in their school district for academic or instructional programs, to participate in any extracurricular activity offered by the district, and to use the services and assistance of the appropriate area education agency" (Terpstra 1994). In practice, home-schooled students usually attend public-school "specials," such as art, music, PE, chorus, and band. Dual enrollment also allows them to participate in sports, have access to district textbooks and resources, participate in standardized testing, and take enrichment classes.

While it seems obvious that home schooling would benefit most from this arrangement, there are also benefits to public schools in terms of community and financial support. For example, school districts in Iowa "can receive state aid for home-schooled children who choose to be part of their school community" (Terpstra 1994). Perhaps even more important are the intangible benefits that may accrue as home educators develop a connection with their schools and begin to more fully appreciate and support them.

Provide a home-school liaison. Ideally, public schools could designate a coordinator who would work with home-school families who desire a connection to public education. At the minimum, this individual could help home-school parents understand and conform to state education requirements. But the liaison would also be in a position to help develop appropriate programs and guidelines that would meet the needs of both public and home schools.

When developing this role, it is essential that the role of the liaison is not perceived as an attempt to control home schooling. This perception can be avoided if the liaison is selected by a group that includes both public-school educators and home schoolers. Because the consensus among home schoolers is that each family should make its own decisions about education, religion, and lifestyle, a liaison's sole purpose should be to help define and satisfy the educational needs of each home-schooled child.

Home schooling is not for everyone, and because the great majority of parents have neither the desire nor the resources to undertake this task, it should not be viewed as a threat to public education. Instead, public educators should join home schoolers in mutually beneficial relationships that improve chances for the academic success of both public-school and home-school children. When public schools work closely with home-school families, they demonstrate that their goal is to help every child reach his or her educational goals. This is the essence of a truly democratic educational system. □

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NAESP's Position on Home Schooling

NAESP's Platform takes the following position on home schooling:

When alternative options such as home schooling have been authorized by state legislation, resources and authority should be provided to make certain that those who exercise these options are held strictly accountable for the academic achievement and social/emotional growth of children.

NAESP urges local and state associations to address these issues as important educational issues.

Home schooling may:

1. Deprive the child of important social experiences;
2. Isolate students from other social/racial/ethnic groups;
3. Deny students the full range of curriculum experiences and materials;
4. Be provided by non-certified and unqualified persons;
5. Create an additional burden on administrators whose duties include the enforcement of compulsory school attendance laws;
6. Not permit effective assessment of academic standards of quality;
7. Violate health and safety standards; and
8. Not provide the accurate diagnosis of and planning for meeting the needs of children with special talents, learning difficulties, and other conditions requiring a typical educational program.

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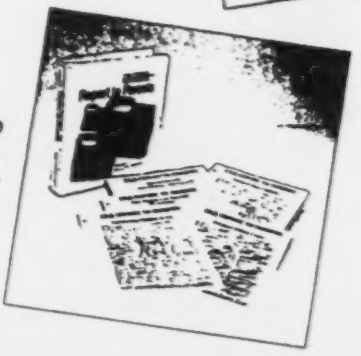

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